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NEWSMAKER - George Jarrett

Microsoft plumbs new DTV heights

Long before I met Tom McMahon face to face, I regularly saw him holding court with knots of industry VIPs in and around the international shows we all slavishly attend. Once someone had confirmed him as Microsoft's director of Advanced Systems Architecture in the fields of digital TV production, transmission and display, I came to regard him as Bill Gates' joker and broker in TV.

I imagined there was a minion housed somewhere in Microsoft whose job it is to keep track of the multiple technology partnerships and technology groups McMahon has helped into being, whilst manouevring Microsoft to a minority share of all the serious action.

In American speak this would be his mission: "What I do is serve as the eyes and ears in this industry for the senior executives of Microsoft," he says. "My job is to be out in the field appraising the issues, the politics, the viable technologies, and feeding my information and guidance back into Redmond corporate.

"I also serve the reverse role -- answering all types of questions about Microsoft, like 'What is Bill Gates really like?'. I have a pretty good perspective on the Microsoft technology that I can share with industry people."

Where a Sony, Philips, Thomson or Panasonic might have dozens of broadcast products, Microsoft buys multiple minority stakes, holds influential positions, licences its software. "All those companies and many more use our software in one way or another. They have an eye glued on broadband, and they care about selling stuff at the consumer end and the plumbing in between," he says.

"Despite what a lot of people think, Microsoft is only software. So we care a lot about the plumbing. We are at so many shows [those 'speakers' corner' sightings] because we are trying to make the deployment happen fast. Our new president and CEO Steve Ballmer said our future is as a software provider, so we need wireless broadband in place quickly."

SUN VALLEY MONTREUX?

McMahon's impact on this unfolding year has already seen him persuade Microsoft to book a big stand, its first ever, at IBC, and take the driving seat in the Advanced Authoring Format (AAF) initiative. He is also one of the biggest reasons why the re-born Montreux Symposium (re-branded The World Television Forum) has been taken even half seriously by a market that had assumed it had sunk into the lake.

"I am on the founding council and board of directors of the new Montreux. We put in $100,000, as have the Montreux Palace, Swiss Air, Nestle, Panasonic, Snell & Wilcox, Deutsche Telekom, and

Sony," he says. "And there are others set to sign up.

"Microsoft's interest there is that this event has always been the good old boys' club, with Joe Flaherty leading the pack. That's going to change. It's not going to be the old broadcast command. Our perspective is that it will be more of an executive business forum going forward.

"We are keeping it alive in one particular sense. I really do believe the Montreux Symposium was a premium networking event, whether at the bar, over breakfast, or strolling beside the lake. That quality is so precious, I would hate to see it go away."

This is why McMahon has volunteered Microsoft to participate in so many ways -- producing the interactive strand of the conference (in partnership with Helmut Stein and Sony's John Ive) and Web streaming video and audio from the sessions.

McMahon acknowledges that Microsoft and its fellow sponsors are taking a risk, and that people will ask what Montreux can offer that NAB, IBC, Siggraph and events like Cebit don't already do. "It's really a test this year to see if we can make it work," he confesses. "The exhibition centre is closed to us, so the entire forum will be contained in the Petit Palais. The implication is that the conference has to be limited to 800-1,000 people, and I think we will fill it. This means a couple of things -- we will charge a lot and it's not going to be the same, familiar orientation of past events there. It will be more like a DAVOS or a Sun Valley conference.

"I go to all of the shows, including Siggraph for 20-odd years. I always get something out of them, or I would stop going. NAB and IBC are now so big I tell people 'If I see you, I'll see you'. Montreux will be small and concentrated and very 'table by the lake'."

AGONY OF 8-VSB

McMahon is just as heavily involved with the AAF specification and its muscular supporters -- acting as board member and referee for Microsoft funding that dates back three years -- and he has plenty of other issues to dog his mind. One thing was an SDMI meeting he had attended in Seattle the previous week, but there is much heavier stuff in his daily grind.

"We are very worried about the copy protection issues bedevilling the US at present," he says. "It breaks down at the consumer, and Microsoft has got very strong opinions about networking.

"The problems rest with copy protection in the consumer's home networks, whether they be Cat5, Wireless (802.11 or Bluetooth), or Powerline or 1394. There will be bridges that span these disparate network types and the copy protection scheme must run across those bridges.

"The current focus on 1394 only is myopic and bankrupt and will lead to consumer dissatisfaction. And as these new home network types are being rolled out now, this problem must be solved very quickly."

And then there is the DTV mess the US has gotten itself into through the widely publicised uprising led by Sinclair Broadcasting. "Microsoft went on the record with the FCC, and filed comments expressing serious concerns about the US standard a while back," says McMahon. "8-VSB is inadequate to service the new equipment coming along in the industry, like the Sony Watchman for your shirt pocket.

"What we care about most is that consumers find DTV is cheap and easy to get connected to. I sincerely hope that Montreux is not going to be another DVB versus ATSC pissing contest, but it is not over yet as a fight."

McMahon is refreshingly candid on issues large and small. In one way he lost a key battle beside the lake because Microsoft was not the only sponsor that wanted the word 'television' expunged from new Montreux thinking. It is a measure of Joe Flaherty's staying power that it is being advertised as 'The World Television Forum, Montreux', but it also tells us something about the 'minority stake' culture that Microsoft profits through, and McMahon espouses so adroitly.

"Take our stakes in the cable companies, for example," he says. "We have the cash to help them go digital. Our investments are always minority ones, and only sometimes are we the beneficiary of the deal. Laying down dollars, they have to stand alone as a good investment above the strategy. All those shareholdings are great for the respective bottom lines, great for Microsoft, and great in turn for its shareholders."

Tom McMahon joined Microsoft as director of advanced TV technology in early 1997. He set off on his career with a BSEE from California State University and now figures as a key member of SMPTE, ATSC, NAB, ACM Siggraph and IEEE. He has been involved in entertainment-related R&D, computer architecture, digital video, 2D and 3D CG, and film and video post production for over 20 years. His many pioneering roles on standards committees have included being active in the joint EBU/SMPTE Task Force for the Exchange of TV Program material as Bit Streams, and part financing of the current AAF initiative. McMahon has done consultancy work for the likes of Mercury Computer Systems, Adobe and Sony Pictures Entertainment, and has spent career time at Future Logic, Symbolics Graphics, Triple-I's Movie and Digital media groups, and at Del Rey Graphics.

ZDF served by Pluto for breakfast

Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen has chosen Pluto's AirSpace multichannel broadcast servers for its breakfast news operation in Berlin. ZDF will make use of 48 hour, 10 channel AirSpace servers to work both as ingest recorders and as video sources for Avid NewsCutters. In addition, 12 hour, 8-channel servers will be used for playout and as a destination for stories and clips transferred by FTP from multiple NewsCutters.

The servers and NewsCutters will be interconnected via Pluto's Spacenet Video Area Network and controlled by Avstar's BCS newsroom control system for on-air playout. The entire system will be delivered and installed by Avid Germany.

This is the first system solution to be provided by the three partners, who announced a co-operation agreement last November. It is also the first of multiple systems ZDF expects to purchase for its world-wide news operations. "We have been searching for a solution that would fulfil all of ZDF's requirements," said Hans Titze and Peter Hardt, project managers for News in Mainz and Berlin. "This combination offers the flexibility to adapt the system to our ideas of a news workflow."

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